Research Article

Toward Inclusive Radio Journalism in India: A Case for Democratizing News in India

Mochish K.S.[1*], Sanjana Shah[2]

[1]Assistant Professor, Faculty of Communication, FLAME University, Pune, Maharashtra.
[2]Research Assistant, FLAME University, Pune, Maharashtra.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolution, significance, and regulatory landscape of radio broadcasting in India, tracing its journey from colonial influence on its current status as a trusted and accessible mass medium. It explores radio's role in supporting democracy, the emergence and challenges of community radio, and the persistent regulatory hurdles that shape its autonomy and content. Drawing on historical developments, committee recommendations, and constitutional provisions, the article highlights the complex interplay between state control, media freedom, and the need for reform in India's radio sector.

INTRODUCTION

Radio has played an integral role in societal development. While digital technologies and shifting ownership patterns have transformed mass media, radio remains the most widely used and trusted medium. A 2020 MRI-Simmons study found that, amid widespread mistrust of other platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic, radio was the most credible source of news compared to newspapers, TV networks, and digital media (*Research: Radio Found to Be Trustworthy among Fans of All Media*, 2021). As a democratic tool, radio promotes minority voices, diversity, and democratic tenets. Its accessibility and reach make it an ideal platform for hosting diverse opinions, discourses, and educational content.

In India, mass media and democracy are interdependent. Media acts as a check on power (Rai, 2015), ensuring citizens' right to information about social, cultural, and political developments. Dominant media forms include print, digital, television, and radio. Like newspapers, Indian radio was heavily influenced by British colonial rule. Post-independence, it became a catalyst for social change (Rai, 2015). Public service broadcasting gave rise to All India Radio (AIR), which continues to deliver educational and informative content. The government retained control over AIR due to its perceived influence, and privatization of radio only began in the 2000s with FM stations—largely restricted to entertainment.

According to Reporters Without Borders (2019), 99% of India's population has radio access. Despite its deep societal roots, radio faces criticism for lacking autonomy, financial support, and meaningful reform. Nevertheless, state-owned and private FM channels thrive, reaching urban and rural audiences alike.

The Growth Trajectory

The development of radio technology dates back to the 1800s when the invention of the dynamo and later the microphone enabled message broadcasting. Edgar Willis (1966) documented that the first recorded radio broadcast

of speech occurred in 1906, when Reginald Fessenden transmitted music to U.S. Navy operators who had previously only received Morse code communications. The technology advanced significantly when Edwin Armstrong invented frequency modulation (FM), transforming radio into a sophisticated system. This innovation led to the formation of dedicated radio networks and revolutionized the broadcasting industry. The Radio Corporation of America pioneered this movement by establishing networks like the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). By 1934, approximately 500 broadcasting stations had unified under the Mutual Broadcasting System. This consolidation prompted regulatory frameworks, notably the Radio Act of 1927 in the United States, which established guidelines ensuring radio served the public interest. During this period, radio broadcasting became increasingly commercialized through product advertisements, emerging as Americans' primary source of entertainment.

In the Indian context, Duggal and Hoene (2023) trace radio's origins to the 1920s, highlighting the foundational role played by *Wireless Notes* and *The Times of India's Engineering Supplement* (Duggal & Hoene, 2022). These publications covered diverse topics including industrial developments, science, business, governance, and education. *Wireless Notes*, in particular, gained widespread popularity through its segments on domestic and international news. The authors note that radio clubs in Mumbai and Calcutta were instrumental in popularizing the medium. In 1925, the Indian Broadcasting Company (IBC) utilized these clubs as commercial ventures while delegating radio's development to private entities. However, a pivotal 1926 agreement between the IBC and the Government of India transferred broadcasting rights to the state. This transition led to the IBC's replacement by the Indian State Broadcasting Service (ISBS), later renamed All India Radio (AIR). Although radio expanded across the subcontinent in subsequent years, the sector has recently experienced decline, the causes of which will be examined later.

Bina Rai's 2015 article identifies four key ways media, including radio, strengthen Indian democracy: (1) facilitating political debate and engagement; (2) serving as a "public watchdog" to maintain governmental checks and balances; (3) ensuring media accessibility evolves with technology; and (4) functioning as a vehicle for democratic values. Rai observes that Indian radio uniquely blends entertainment with current affairs, though she argues that in a diverse, developing nation like India, mass media must transcend mere information and entertainment. She emphasizes media's responsibility to provide education and foster social mobility - essential for informed public opinion and government accountability. Rai (2015) succinctly captures this dual role: media serves as an "instrument of social change, economic progress,

and moral development," establishing the framework for radio's potential to deepen Indian democracy.

Community radio has emerged as a vital democratic medium, broadcasting localized information and amplifying marginalized cultures. These stations bridge geographical divides while fostering community engagement and democratic participation. Gaynor and O'Brien's (2017) study of Irish community radio stations identified limitations to their democratic functioning while proposing an inclusive participation framework. Their "open-access" policy model provides marginalized groups with educational content often excluded from mainstream coverage (Gaynor & O'Brien, 2017). Unlike commercial stations, community radios actively interact with listeners, strengthening communal ties.

Pavarala (2015) examines South Asian community radio, particularly India's institutional challenges. In India's diverse democracy, community stations gained importance as alternatives to government-controlled harmonization efforts. While crucial for representing marginalized voices, restrictive policies have hindered their growth. A growing concern is NGOs operating stations to advance organizational agendas rather than community interests (Pavarala, 2015). Indian regulations further constrain private radio by prohibiting independent news broadcasting, citing potential security risks from certain regions. Financial viability poses another challenge, as niche audiences force reliance on government funding - primarily from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, which views these stations as platforms for official communications. Pavarala concludes by advocating policy reforms to unleash community radio's potential.

The expanding reach of communication technologies has intensified the media-culture interplay, making content control increasingly significant. During the World Wars, governments recognized radio's propagandistic potential. Miller (1941) analyzed this dilemma during politically volatile times, noting how belligerent nations like Germany and Italy weaponized broadcasting, while European democracies coordinated war-related messaging (Miller, 1941).

India maintained governmental radio control since its inception. Today, AIR operates 262 stations broadcasting in 23 languages and 146 dialects (Rashid, 2023). Post-independence concerns about radio's vast reach in volatile social conditions justified state airwave ownership. While private radio ownership was permitted in the 2000s, only in 2019 could private stations broadcast news - restricted to AIR-sourced content (Rashid, 2023). India's constitution presents a paradox: Article 19(1)(a) guarantees media freedom (including radio) against undue speech restrictions (Rai, 2015), yet simultaneously declares airwaves public property under Article 39(b), permitting state control for public welfare. The Indian Telegraph Act, 1885 further empowers state broadcasting

regulation (Jaysimha & Mandal, 2022). Consequently, despite constitutional free speech protections and anti-monopoly provisions, AIR remains state controlled.

The Indian Story

Following India's independence, the central government assumed control over radio broadcasting to manage the volatile socio-political landscape. Over the decades, several committees were appointed to address the issue of granting autonomy to radio (Kumar, 2003). The Chanda Committee, chaired by Ashok K. Chanda, reviewed media policies, regulations, and laws in India. Preceding it were the Akash Bharati (later renamed Prasar Bharati) and the Verghese Committee. In 1989, a new government introduced the Prasar Bharati Act, which had significant implications for radio (Kumar, 2003). The Act proposed an autonomous Radio and Television Authority to grant licenses to private radio stations. However, when passed in 1997, it resulted only in structural changes to All India Radio (AIR), leaving its autonomy largely unchanged (Kumar, 2003). The committee also recommended measures to shield Prasar Bharati from global and local competition, emphasizing the need for a more independent and robust media framework (Kumar, 2003).

In 1964, AIR faced criticism for its inability to educate and inform audiences, focusing instead on government-approved content (Kumar, 2003). During this period, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, under Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's guidance, initiated a two-phase plan to expand AIR's reach. India sought to project itself as a progressive, industrialized nation aligned with Western ideals, and radio was seen as a key vehicle for this image (Kumar, 2003). The Chanda Committee endorsed this vision, recommending increased coverage, funding, and improved content quality. It criticized the central government's monopolization, which diminished program creativity and quality, turning AIR into a propaganda tool (Kumar, 2003). A key proposal was to establish separate, independent organizations for radio and television to enhance specialization (Kumar, 2003). Although these recommendations were insightful and could have elevated radio's standards, the government deemed them unfeasible due to the prevailing political and economic climate (Kumar, 2003).

As India progressed post-independence, radio's autonomy declined further, with AIR increasingly serving as a platform for government policies rather than education or information (Kumar, 2003). Post-emergency, a new government attempted to grant media autonomy, increase funding, and reposition radio as an educational tool for public upliftment (Kumar, 2003). However, these efforts were incomplete, and the subsequent government's push for media commercialization in the 1980s derailed autonomy plans (Kumar, 2003). This tug-of-war between granting and restricting autonomy persisted with changing governments

The introduction of private radio followed a landmark 1995 Supreme Court ruling in *The Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting v. Cricket Association of Bengal*, which declared airwaves public property, paving the way for decentralized radio (Sarkar et al., 2019). This ruling facilitated the 1999 *Expansion of FM Radio Broadcasting Through Private Agencies (Phase I)* policy, allowing private enterprises to operate FM stations, and by 2002, educational institutions could host community radio stations (Sarkar et al., 2019). The 2003 Radio Broadcast Policy Committee recommended that stations be allowed to independently curate and report news to ensure diverse representation in the radio ecosystem (Sarkar et al., 2019).

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) echoed these calls for reform in its 2004 Consultation Paper, proposing regulations for private radio, such as prohibiting content that incites dissent against communities or religions while adhering to the AIR Code (Sarkar et al., 2019). However, individuals were barred from starting community radio stations to broadcast news under the Grant of Permission Agreement (GoP). In Phase II, some regulations were relaxed, but the news ban persisted. TRAI's 2008 Consultation Paper for Phase III recommended allowing private stations to broadcast AIR-approved news and current affairs, a compromise driven by concerns over timely regulatory intervention given radio's accessibility (Sarkar et al., 2019). These provisions were implemented in 2011's Phase III policy.

Safeguarding media's right to free speech is crucial for democratic values. Historically, colonial governments tightly controlled press freedom in India, a challenge that persists post-independence (Prakriti, n.d.). While Press Law 96 (1996) prohibits censorship, laws like the Combating Information and Communications Technology Crimes Law hinder its application (Prakriti, n.d.). Commercialization, centralized control, ownership patterns, and self-censorship further erode media freedom, reducing plurality, limiting public access to information, and stifling debate (Singh, 2024). This necessitates an environment where diverse news from various communities can be broadcast to enhance public awareness.

Noronha (2000) proposes a three-tier broadcasting system, integrating state-owned, private,

and community radio to ensure developmental, educational, and localized content. Alternatively, Thomas (2013) suggests that AIR remain state-owned but focus on educational content and local voices rather than competing with private stations. These frameworks aim to include diverse voices and increase public awareness.

Reforming policies to allow private, community, and public radio to independently broadcast news will deepen India's democratic commitment. Empowering these stations will enable urban and rural communities to engage in social, cultural, and political discourse, fostering a more inclusive media landscape.

CONCLUSION

As part of the Private FM Radio Phase III Policy, the government has initiated an e-auction for 730 new radio broadcasts across 234 cities, laying the foundation for economic growth, job creation, cultural promotion, and support for local dialects (Shukla, 2024). A 2023 Toluna India report on FM radio engagement in Tier II and III markets revealed that nearly 80% of respondents from diverse social, economic, and financial backgrounds listen to radio, with even higher engagement among working professionals and students (66%) (Toluna India, 2023). An economic survey reported that by June 2022, India had 388 private radio stations, underscoring their success in delivering entertainment nationwide (Dutta, 2023). In a country as vast and diverse as India, with significant radio engagement, expanding private radio's ability to broadcast news and current affairs could profoundly enhance public awareness and strengthen democracy.

To realize this potential, broadcasting rights for private and community radio must be actively improved. Establishing an independent regulatory board is essential to provide oversight, ensure progress, and promote transparency. A new model that permits independent broadcasting, regulates cross-media ownership, encourages diversity, and fosters an environment of openness is critical. Such reforms will empower radio to serve as a democratic pillar, amplifying marginalized voices, facilitating inclusive discourse, and bridging urban and rural divides. By embracing these changes, India can leverage radio's unparalleled reach to deepen its commitment to democratic values, ensuring that all communities have access to information and opportunities for engagement in social, cultural, and political spheres.

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